



Introduction to Critical Concepts: Families, Intimacies and Personal Relationships

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Critical Concepts: Families, Intimacies and Personal Relationships

1.1 A good amount of sounding work is present in the sociological fields of family and relationship studies. This work informs the understanding and management of perceived crises in family life and anxieties around the stability of adult couple-parenting relationships that characterize political discourses, social policies and cultural narratives on relationships in the twenty-first century. These works have unpicked early functionalist views; they have built on issues of ethics of care, on social constructivist approaches to gender and on the latest feminist scholarship to carve new conceptual ground. It is incontrovertible that there have been major changes in the composition and experience of families and relationships over the past 50 years or so. In the UK the percentage of adults living in one-person households has doubled over this time; the proportion of single to married individuals has increased, as has the relative amount of divorced individuals (Hunt, 2009). Individuals now live in a diverse range of intimate living arrangements and relationship formations. The conceptual challenge to researchers working in the field of family and relationship studies, and one taken up by the contributors to this Special Section, is how to carry on building concepts and finding new methods to capture the vitality of personal relationships while keeping sight of the social contexts, patterns and practices of contemporary intimate life.

1.2 Since the 1990s the use of the concept of family has been firmly and steadily challenged, in particular from feminist scholarship and work sensitized by reflections emerging from the cultural turn in the social sciences and the humanities. This work engaged with new choices and expressions of lifestyles that took the transformation of ways of living as an expression of a changed and changing social life. Mainstream social sciences theory incorporated these reflections within the framework of individualization developing a narrative that was constructed around the idea of the independent adult with no relevant relational ties. The debate was energised and expanded by materialist feminist interventions, which highlighted the significance of dependencies, interdependencies, connectedness and relationality as central features in social groupings identified as family or intimate relations.

1.3 At the core of the debate is recognition that the concept of family no longer captures the realities of contemporary lives. This calls into question what is meant by family nowadays. What areas of people's lives are left out when the concept of family is invoked? Should the concept be abandoned or retained in any modified form? Can family be an adjective? Can the idea of personal life capture the connectedness implied in the concept of family? Does a relation of intimacy equate with a family relationship? What are the limits of each of these emerging new ideas to capture the significance of contemporary connections between individuals closely related by choice, by blood, by culture and so on? In this Special Section of *Sociological Research Online* we aim to take stock of the sociological imagination which is applied in making sense of contemporary ways of living, reflecting on the conceptual frameworks that are being used, asking whether existing analytical tools have kept pace with changes and with continuities in family life, intimacies and personal relationships today.

1.4 The collection of papers presented here draws on ideas that were presented and discussed at a colloquium^[1] that we organised as part of the Families and Relationships Study Group of the British Sociological Association.^[2] This dialogic event was designed to facilitate critical debate on the value of prominent concepts used in the study of contemporary living, interrogating the value of different ways of framing, theorising and making sense of personal and social worlds. There are inevitably both tensions and synergies in such dialogue. It is implausible (and indeed undesirable) to suggest that members of the Study Group might speak with one voice. The event explored in exciting and intellectually invigorating discussions, ways in which we might develop different manners of writing and researching personal lives and relationship. The occasion afforded participants the opportunity to reflect on some of the key issues that shape the concerns of the field of study and the papers in this Special Section represent and develop

some of the ideas that were raised at the colloquium.

Researching families, intimacies and personal relationships

2.1 Contemporary research has demonstrated that who we consider family to be and how we construct our kin networks is qualitatively oriented, with people demonstrating considerable creativity in their design and composition and how they perceive and maintain these networks (Stacey, 2004). There has been a move away from determining notions of obligation towards reflexive acts of care and intimacy (Williams, 2004) that are premised on trust and mutuality. The family is a site of contestation, combining a mixture of experiment, pastiche and nostalgia (Stacey, 1996). There is perceptible shift from family as defined through household and kin-relatedness, towards ideas which acknowledge the different ways that families stretch beyond these parameters. It is suggested that this 'extended family requires an extended approach; a wide angle research lens that can record the evolving matrix of intimacy' (Gabb, 2008: 17). This places increasing importance on how relationships are constituted, with ideas of social change being at the forefront of this processual, lifecourse perspective (McLeod and Thomson, 2009).

2.2 Families are now situated as part of expansive 'networks of intimacy' (Jamieson, 1998: 77); personal relationships forge dynamic and multidimensional connections that are held together through shared histories and memories (Smart 2007). The current conceptual and analytical shift is encapsulated in the phrase 'family practices'; an emblematic term that was developed by David Morgan (1996) and one which continues to be used in the framing of UK family studies analysis. Family practices begins from the starting point that families are what families do (Silva and Smart, 1999). It is, therefore, fair to say that are three strands of thinking which have been particularly influential in shaping and reorienting contemporary UK family and relationship studies over the past 15 years, these are, in a simplified presentation:

Family practices as 'sets of practices which deal in some way with ideas of parenthood, kinship and marriage and the expectations and obligations which are associated with these practices' (Morgan 1996: 11).

Intimacy as defined as 'any form of *close association* in which people acquire familiarity, that is shared *detailed knowledge* about each other' (Jamieson 1998: 8).

Personal life as a concept that incorporates 'all sorts of families, all sorts of relationships and intimacies, diverse sexualities, friendships and acquaintanceships' (Smart 2007: 188).

2.3 Contributions in this Special Section engage with and extend these ideas about family in contemporary sociology and the emphasis on practices, intimacy and personal life. There is a palpable sense that we need to define new ways of understanding relationships, ways that do not fall back on unhelpful tropes that privilege certain ways of relating and/or grand theorizing that obscures lived experience (Simon Duncan, in this issue). There is a need to incorporate into sociological analyses the wide range of emotional and relational dimensions that are meaningful in everyday life (Smart, 2007). It is necessary to understand personal, relational and material matters in everyday life in the context of broader and long-standing social problems and issues; to draw from how people live in their homes and their everyday practices in a world driven by forces that go far beyond any individual or small group (Silva 2010). In this sense, themes that cut across the contributions here include fresh attention to geographical and cultural location, socio-economic status and class, powerful imbalances that continue to shape relationships and the impact of social categories in framing and informing lived experience. There is also renewed attention to the research instruments that we use to make sense of and interrogate our significant relationship connections.

2.4 Methodological dimensions are explored in several of the papers in this Special Section. For example, Duncan contends that the discursive, which appears from semi-structured interviews and surveys, should be linked to practical and unconscious materials generated by observation and biographical interviews. Jacqui Gabb combines autobiographical, anecdotal and empirical research data to re-situate emotions at the heart of family studies. Mary Jane Kehily and Rachel Thomson examine intersections that unfold when the macro socio-historical and the micro personal and subjective are brought together. Research in this vein draws on and extends modes of understanding and analysis that derive from different disciplinary traditions, including psycho-social perspectives (Roseneil, 2006, Thomson et al., 2001) global and transnational studies (Sue Heath, Derek McGhee and Paulina Trevena, and also Lynn Jamieson in this issue), for example.

2.5 Conceptually, this collection offers just a flavour of some of the trends and strands of thinking in contemporary family and relationships research in the UK. The contributions presented do not cover the range and scope of contemporary research in this area although they do address some of the preoccupations that currently *trouble* family sociologists and researchers of personal relationships. The key purpose of this collection is therefore to raise and address some of the questions that are emerging in this field of study. These include: How far do the concepts families, intimacies and personal relationships help us to understand the ways people create togetherness? Do they illuminate or obscure the relational processes of everyday life? How helpful are these concepts for understanding new ways of relating? Are there other existing and/or new concepts that are more useful? What is the role of the concepts in grasping change and continuities in social life? What is the scale and size of 'the social' involved in each of these concepts? How does the personal divide or separate from 'the social'? How do the concepts of families, intimacies and personal relationships distinguish from each other or link up? Do they ever merge or do they remain distinct at some level? Can we keep sight of materiality and the differences which effect experiences of family and intimate relationships - such as class, race/ethnicity, poverty - when the focus is on micro analyses of personal life? The engagement with these questions does not provide neatly packaged answers; instead it seeks to explore how ways of thinking and the formulation of concepts are embedded in theoretical debates that bring together understandings of personal and social worlds.

2.6 Controversies about the recent theoretical developments in the study of relationality are therefore evident in this collection of papers. For instance, Val Gillies in this issue presents a critique about the new interest in the personal within sociology, which for her captures only a partial view of connected lives and serves to decentre the notion of the family. For Gillies, research on family has of late been operating outside of mainstream sociology, mirroring the shift in political discourse away from ideas of function and structure towards ideas of parental competence. This decentring of the study of the family as a crucial social phenomenon has been made in the wake of new theoretical engagements emanating from individualization (Giddens, 1991) and governmentality (Rose, 2002) which, although shedding light on how relationships are lived and understood, have prioritised the individual rather than collective experience. In this context, government policies have focused the agenda onto what families do, using competencies, that is to say parenting practices, as the central feature in policy developments. This, Gillies contends, dismisses families as structures and obscures the changing political agenda which serves to stigmatise some families as inevitably 'incompetent'. She argues that the attention currently afforded to intimacy and personal relationships exacerbates the problem, rendering these changes in family and parenting policy invisible.

2.7 Other papers in this issue take a different view, engaging with a variety of new ways of capturing relationality and the social; demonstrating how social structures, policy initiatives and family intervention intersect with ordinary everyday interactions. It is not just the essential matter of enlarging thinking to address transnationalism, globalization, increased migration, fluid links, the exposure of alternative sexualities, the significance of the material and technological world, the influence of new media in ways of relating and so on, which challenge existing theories. It is also the understanding that theories are in themselves socially produced and that the methods by which we grasp 'reality' produce ways of patterning 'the real'. These papers seek to stretch theoretical and methodological boundaries, aiming to widen sociological explanations that account for relationalities, reflecting on the *processes of knowing* about personal relations, intimacy and family life as much as sociological knowledge in itself.

2.8 Heath, McGhee and Trevena explore the uses of concepts from within family studies, for example, family practices, families of choices, family display and connectedness and their usefulness in making sense of transnational family lives. They engage with alternative concepts and exchanges on the basis of their reflections on research about international labour mobility. Their stress is on everyday domestic lives, kinship practices transcending across borders. Considering an empirical case of Polish migrants in the UK they find individuals talking fluently and centrally about factors of intimacy, affect and relationality linked to their migratory experience. Finding that Transnational Family Studies (TFS) use a distinct language, the authors nevertheless note overlaps with this and family studies discourse. Given that 'doing family' at a distance entails particular practices of family making, family claims and the closeness of family ties both within and across borders implies the development of connections and making choices in new cross cultural contexts. The authors contend that new complexities of personal life demand that concepts are created and frameworks challenged to account for them. The language and conceptual framework deployed in TFS have the potential to benefit from developments in family studies, but they also challenge some of the taken-for-granted ideas that underpin this field of study.

2.9 David Morgan seeks to further elucidate the idea of 'family practices' in the context of contemporary ideas on intimacy, personal life and family configurations. He uses the term 'family practices' as an illustration of wider currents of thought in sociology engaged with understanding how social relations are enacted and how they are represented as symbols. He considers the roots of the concept within sociological analysis noting that it is distinct from the notion of practice as proposed in Bourdieu. His emphasis is on ideas of fluidity, on process, on the 'doing' of family. He provides thoughtful reflection on the concept of family practice and its connection to other concepts such as intimacy, personal life, family configuration, 'caringscapes' and the total social organization of labour (TSOL) deployed in the field. For Morgan the concept of practice aims to take everyday life and experience seriously without either dissolving the experiential and the personal into the individual, or obscuring them within large collectivities. It is Morgan's contention that the 'practices approach' is complementary to, rather than in competition with a wide range of other conceptual frameworks that facilitate understanding of family life.

2.10 In Jamieson's contribution she urges theorists of social change to attend to *practices of intimacy* in order to explain the articulation between selves and social worlds, geopolitical space and historical time. In claiming this, Jamieson asks what is lost if the concept of intimacy and its conceptual relatives (love, relationship family practices and personal life) are not taken into account. Her emphasis is on the mutual production of social selves and social worlds. She contends that socio-cultural change is effected through personal life which cannot be dislocated from social processes. She draws on a wide number of analyses of the ways that intimate family practices bear on public stories, across national boundaries. Focusing on intimacy and social change in two areas of personal life, parental authority and gender relations, Jamieson suggests that attention to practices of intimacy can facilitate understanding of social change in an era of globalisation. She presents a case for the need of further work about the links between a global cultural economy and wider repertoires of intimacies.

2.11 Tackling ideas of embodied intimacy and emotional attachment, Gabb examines how differences and inequalities between intimates are experienced and understood. She engages with this question by focusing on the materiality of difference, suggesting that everyday family living is enriched by the asymmetry of encounters. Focusing attention on intergenerational, human-animal, and human-object relationships she contends that to put relationships and families in context, we need to reframe the conceptual lens onto an ethics of otherness. This argument draws on the philosophies of Young (1997) and Levinas (1985, 1969) to revisit ideas of 'significant others' through an appreciation of dynamic intersections between natural-cultural worlds. She examines some of the points where knowledge on relationships has become stuck, advocating methodological creativity in order to open up understandings of everyday

intimacies. Gabb suggests that by focusing analytical attention on incidental moments and everyday minutiae, new and dynamic conceptual points of departure come to the fore, in moments of undoing. In looking between the theoretical cracks for illuminating fragments she suggests that it is possible to produce a quieter, slow and uncertain methodological approach that literarily reflect the multiplicities, fractures and connections that comprise relational living.

2.12 Kehily and Thomson seek to explore the embodiment of relationality while being mindful of the temporal processes that shape materiality. They present a framework that addresses intersections between macro (social history) and micro (personal and subjective, situated and produced) circumstances of life, using the example of motherhood to illustrate their argument. The arrival of a new generation in a family represents a dynamic moment where old and new interpersonal relationships are configured and re-configured, in response to new roles and the additional emotional and material resources required by these new sets of circumstances. A birth thus results, they say, in 'an intensive traffic of conscious and unconscious meaning within a relationship network'. They suggest that motherhood creates a 'situation' where 'coincidences' (temporal, or social patterns and biographical, among others) are constituted. Using the concept of 'situation' to incorporate materiality, diversity and embeddedness they build on Raymond Williams' (1961) work on 'structures of feeling' to interrogate maternal culture as a 'situation' that is made and remade by successive and overlapping generations of women. Relationships specific to a situation are placed by researchers into a 'configuration' (Elias, 1978) of family or community. Thus, by being attentive to the concept of configuration researchers are able to capture moments of social change. This is a sophisticated proposition engaged with both ordinary matters of living and historical process.

2.14 Duncan engages with the problem of individualisation theories, which have been roundly criticised for the lack of congruence between their depiction of contemporary family life and the kinds of lives represented in empirical studies. He addresses this via an exploration of social change in the lives of women: what is deemed 'socially proper' for women to do. The exploration of the case of women's choice of full-time motherhood and employment indicates that over time there has been an intensification of the geographical pattern by which wealthier women in the South of England abandon jobs to concentrate on raising children, whereas women in the North of England cannot afford this option. These findings contradict claims by individualization theorists, or an emphasis on the reflexive project of the self, since Southern women's greater choice and access to resources lead to embracing more traditional gender norms. Duncan deploys Bourdieu's notion of the habitus with the concept of 'gendered moral rationalities' that he developed with colleague Ros Edwards, to effectively counter both individualization and structuration theories. He finds the notion of 'bricolage' to be useful in accounting for some of the ways that agency is institutionalized. Bricolage shows how different resources are pulled together to enable people to get by and effect social-personal transformations. Duncan seeks to avoid grand theorising, advocating an alternative theorisation around 'pragmatism'; a strategy that conjoins 'agency', choice and constraint.

Conclusion

3.1 The colloquium where the first iterations of some of these ideas were discussed was intentionally open in format. There was no pre-set agenda, no aspiration to reach a theoretical conclusion and certainly no desire to close down conceptual possibilities to a single orthodoxy. The field of families and relationships studies is a dynamic intellectual environment, covering a diverse range of viewpoints and research interests. The contributions in this collection can only hope to sow a few seeds of thought about *some* of the conceptual and methodological possibilities that are being explored in this rich vein of work.

3.2 We approached *Sociological Research Online* to publish this collection of papers as a Special Section because as a journal it is committed to promoting dialogue on and around the work that it presents. We hope that readers take up the opportunities that this offers, both to critically engage with the ideas contained within the individual papers and also possible intersections between these different ideas. Beyond this there remains vast scope for the development and presentation of a wide range of other perspectives. This Special Section is therefore perceived as a starting point; any ensuing debate can only serve to further enrich this vibrant field of study.

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Notes

¹ This Study Group event was held at the BSA London offices on 6th November 2009.

² <<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/FamilySG.htm>>.

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